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HOT TROPIC

Ocean's Edge Resort, the next boutique Caribbean destination.

BY LAURA DECARUFEL

With his ready smile, well-worn sandals and casual acquaintance with a belt, Brian Dobbin doesn't seem the most natural person in the crowded restaurant to be the CEO of one of the world's most dynamic development companies. But once the waitress sets down his chicken quesadillas and Dobbin, unfailingly polite, thanks her with eye contact and that big grin, he turns his attention to the reason he's here, in the Caribbean nation of St. Kitts and Nevis, and something happens. He becomes a force to be reckoned with.

The company is Newfound Property International, and its latest project is Ocean's Edge Resort, on the island of St. Kitts. On the surface it all sounds familiar enough: a boutique property that, when it's finished in 2009, will have 185 units, from apartments to cottages to villas, nestled in a curve of beach and turquoise water. There will be plunging pools, tennis courts and a spa. But what sets Ocean's Edge—and, indeed, Newfound—apart is how the property is being developed, and why.

"What we're selling is an authentic experience," says Dobbin, who has a handy way with a sound bite. "It's a different way of looking at the Caribbean. We want to create a property that respects the island and its people—that complements rather than overwhelms." As Dobbin sees it, the people who buy into Ocean's Edge are also buying into St. Kitts; the resort will follow strict green-building principles and use local labour. The property then becomes an investment, a second home that can be rented out. "The days of the hotel vacation are pretty much over," says Dobbin. He points out rising mass affluence as the propeller behind the movement. "This is the evolution of leisure."

Dobbin is something of an expert in that realm. His thick and charming accent is a clue both to where he's from and to the site of his company's first success: the Humber Valley Resort in Newfoundland. Humber, as everyone at Newfound calls it, is the touchstone, an example of what, against all odds, worked: a high-

end destination in an unlikely tourism setting. Now, Dobbin is determined to bring that same magic touch south.

Before deciding on St. Kitts, he and members of the Newfound team visited half a dozen tropical countries. He cites celebrity-drenched St. Barts and Anguilla as success stories, and an island like St. Martin, with its blank, pulsing hotel compounds, as a disappointment. "In selling the experience, they destroyed it," says Dobbin.

To that end, Ocean's Edge vows not to replicate the high-end kitsch associated with some resorts: no vast breakfast buffets, no faux-marble statues, no gaudy casinos. Newfound's direction is, instead, decidedly upward.

Recently, a handful of enviable luxury brands—including Auberge, for one—signed on to add a little glitter to the island. Rather than see this as competition, Dobbin welcomes it. "We're all working for the same purpose. We're all in it together."

Part of this largesse might come from Dobbin's keen awareness of what spectacular opportunity exists in this tiny country of around 45,000 people, with its lush rainforests and pristine beaches. Living postcards abound. Near the port, where cruise ships like the *Queen Mary* dock, fishing boats sell their wares. Along the coast, mountains rise into the mist and white egrets nestle in acacia branches. Boys in school uniforms play cricket in the park. There is no Starbucks or McDonald's, although the outside world makes its mark in mysterious ways: a framed picture of 50 Cent in an art gallery, the latest Coke advertisement on an abandoned sugar silo.

St. Kitts has a strong middle class, and has been independent since 1983, though there are ugly reminders of its colonial past. One building still has chains embedded in the walls, where slaves were auctioned off; it's now a dental clinic, "specializing in painless dentistry". The economy has traditionally depended on sugar cane as the main industry, but that's now changed. "Everyone recognizes that tourism is their industry," says Dobbin.

Which is good news for Newfound. The company has several other projects on the go, including resorts being planned on two additional continents. Still, it's clear that Ocean's Edge and St. Kitts are close to Dobbin's heart. He seems to feel a responsibility to the country, and to its people, who have welcomed him here. Happily, Newfound seems well-equipped to bring the island to the next tier of tourism. "Anyone can put a marble floor down," Dobbin says. "Space and privacy are the new luxury." ●